Peering Past Exhibitor Displays at Meetings

By Rabiya S. Tuma

Anyone who has attended a major medical conference knows that the exhibit hall can be elaborate, to say the least. Some booths, at more than 5,000 sq. ft., exceed the size of most houses, with plush carpet and espresso machines to match. Exhibit halls fill rooms the size of stadiums. It sometimes seems out of control. So what is the role of these displays in the meeting and who regulates them?

To find out, the Journal asked a variety of medical organizations—the American Society for Clinical Oncology (ASCO), the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), the American Society of Hematology (ASH), the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium (SABCS), and the American Heart Association (AHA)—about the practices governing their exhibits. The specific answers vary, but the trend shows that while the booths are provided for educational purposes, they bring in substantial financial support for the annual meetings and the associations themselves.

All the organizations charge for booth space, with rates for most meetings ranging from $27/sq. ft. for ASH to $36/sq. ft. for ASCO. SABCS rates are the highest, at $75/sq. ft., though they do offer a 3 x 8-foot table top for $3,000. All the associations, except the AHA, charge more for high-traffic spaces, such as corners or islands. And the associations all set aside a fraction of their exhibit hall for nonprofit groups and charge them less than the commercial rate. ASH, for example, provides booth space to nonprofits for just $525 for a standard 10 x 10-foot booth.

The standard 10 x 10-foot booth brings in $2,700 or more, and a well-placed 7,000-sq. ft. booth could bring in a quarter of a million dollars. So the fees for the floor space add up quickly. However, only ASH and AACR were willing to divulge how much the fees contributed to their budgets. In 2006, for their annual meeting in Orlando, Fla., ASH’s exhibitor fees covered 80% of the meeting costs, which accounted for 15% of the association’s overall annual budget. In 2006, the fees covered 20% of the cost of AACR’s annual meeting in Washington, D.C., which accounted for 3% of its overall budget. ASCO said this information was more detailed than what they make public or provide in their annual report. AHA said that such information was proprietary. The SABCS organizers declined to answer any questions, beyond what was available on their Web site, saying that they were too busy preparing for their meeting more than 9 months away.

Of the four associations responding to the Journal’s questions, only ASCO currently limits the maximum size of a booth, at 7,000 sq. ft. AHA has no restrictions, allowing exhibitors to “purchase as much space as needed to display their product in a professional manner,” said a spokesperson for AHA’s meetings department. Meanwhile, because the number of large booths—5,000 sq. ft. or larger—has been increasing each year, ASH is considering size limits, said Ayuko Kimura-Fay, the association’s director of meetings.

The actual rules for the exhibition halls come from a variety of sources but are largely the responsibility of the associations themselves. The federal Office of the Inspector General has a compliance program for pharmaceutical manufacturers, which provides general guidelines on how company representatives should and

Exhibitors’ Influence on Major Medical Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Avg No. of exhibitors*</th>
<th>Current cost/ sq. ft. ($) †</th>
<th>Avg attendance</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASCO</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>32–36</td>
<td>31,000</td>
<td>ASCO limits the size of booths in its exhibit space to 7,000 ft².</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AACR</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>28.50–30</td>
<td>16,700</td>
<td>AACR reserves approximately 5% of its exhibit floor space for nonprofit groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASH</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>27–35</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>For $115,000, a company gets its name on the meeting bag; this pays for the bag plus shipping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHA</td>
<td>~350</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>For $25,000, a company can put its name on a bag containing an item given to food attendees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SABCS</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>For $150,000, a company can support the SABCS’s webcast and have its logo displayed for 3 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Over 3 years, 2005–2007, except for ASH, where only 2 years were used.
† For-profit companies. Nonprofit groups get a discount.
should not interact with health care professionals, but the guidelines do not refer specifically to exhibitions. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) adapted the government’s information into a written code; the policy states, for example, that golf balls with a company logo are not a reasonable gift. But the PhRMA code also does not provide exhibition-specific guidelines. The Healthcare Convention Exhibitors Association—which comprises primarily pharmaceutical companies that set up booths in the exhibit halls, though medical societies can join as associate members—has put together such information, for example, specifying what should and should not be said about investigational products, as well as more mundane information about the logistics of the exhibit hall.

“Each year, all rules and [exhibitor] policies are reviewed by staff and clarified or revised as necessary based on our experiences from the previous meeting,” ASH’s Kimura-Fay said. “We also look at rules and policies that are developed by other large medical organizations, as well as guidelines that are set by the Healthcare Convention Exhibitors Association.”

So what about the giveaways that attendees seek with such enthusiasm? Both the federal guidelines and the PhRMA code suggest limits for the value of gifts, $100 or less per gift, and they indicate that such items should benefit the patient or educate the physician. However, the associations themselves are the ones that say “yea” or “nay” to individual items, said Linda Still, director of meetings and exhibits at AACR. “Nothing can be given away without our approval.” And not all items are approved. For example, this year one company wanted to give out an action figure-like item, which the association rejected. They also vetoed an item that could be used as a slingshot. “We decided that they would be flying all over the hall, so we decided not to do that. We try to encourage them to give items that are professional and educational in nature.”

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AACR 2007/Todd Buchanan

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